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Read the policy brief: www.policymattersohio.org/BudgetCharterVoucher_2011.htm

The State Budget's Impact on Ohio Charter and Voucher Policy Brief Outlines Expansion, Highlights Weak Accountability Measures

Even as Gov. John Kasich and the Ohio General Assembly have slashed funding for public schools, they have reshaped state education policy. Changes in the new state budget bill included charter and voucher expansions and modifications to charter accountability measures.

Unfortunately, these changes do little to strengthen the quality of publicly funded, privately operated charter and voucher schools in Ohio, according to a new policy brief released today by Policy Matters Ohio, a nonprofit, nonpartisan research institute based in Cleveland.

“State lawmakers have missed yet another opportunity to adopt a high-standards approach for all schools,” said Piet van Lier, senior researcher for Policy Matters and report author. “Instead, they’ve continued Ohio’s quantity-over-quality approach to charters and vouchers, an approach that has not served our children well.”

The budget bill’s new accountability measures for charter school sponsors, for example, are too weak to have a significant impact. An analysis by Policy Matters shows that they will likely target smaller sponsors that oversee fewer than 15 percent of the state’s charters, even though 45 percent of charters were rated in Academic Watch or Academic Emergency last year. Important measures that would have significantly strengthened sponsor accountability were removed in conference committee.

At the same time, the bill expanded the number of districts where start-up charters can be created, and state law continues to allow unchecked and unexamined growth of charters in districts rated as challenged. For example, even as Columbus enrollment has dropped and the district has reduced its number of schools to 125 from 146 over the past decade, 75 charters, including online schools and charters located in other districts, now enroll Columbus children. This kind of rapid growth, with no meaningful criteria to keep low-performing schools from setting up shop, does nothing to improve education for Ohio’s children. Columbus, like all urban Ohio districts, is permanently designated as “challenged” by Ohio law. Significant improvements have helped Columbus and other urban districts climb out of the state’s lowest ratings, yet they remain open to charter expansion.



Furthermore, the new law adds no requirement that sponsors or the Ohio Department of Education (ODE) carefully evaluate schools and operators before they are approved; imposing stricter criteria relating to operators' academic track records would be one simple path to increase quality on the front end.

“Because the legislature did nothing to raise the bar for entry into Ohio’s charter sector, it’s still too easy for deep-pocketed management companies, many of them for-profit, to open new charters,” said van Lier. “Profit-seeking operators or those unprepared for the challenges of running a school end up playing games of chance with the futures of too many Ohio children.”

On the school voucher front, lawmakers have ignored the need to thoroughly evaluate existing programs before expanding both the Cleveland and Educational Choice programs. In Cleveland the budget bill lifts restrictions for high school students and raises the maximum voucher amount to match the statewide EdChoice voucher. These changes will create growth in a program that had seen dropping participation. Even without growth, however, the higher voucher value will mean an extra \$5 million deduction this year from the Cleveland district’s state aid, money that will be funneled to private, mostly Catholic, schools.

Statewide, children who might otherwise attend an estimated 31 district schools are newly eligible to apply for EdChoice vouchers. The budget bill also created a new special education voucher, which will be available for the 2012-13 school year to 5 percent of the state’s estimated 260,000 special needs students. It is concerning that in creating this program, the legislature has ignored documented problems with the state’s autism voucher, after which the new program is modeled.

This policy brief on the state budget’s impact on Ohio charter and voucher policy includes a series of recommendations to strengthen accountability, increase quality and boost student achievement. Policy Matters recommends that collaboration be incentivized in charter policy; current practice that pits districts and charters against each other in competition for funds and students has done little to ensure Ohio’s children receive a better education. Other charter recommendations are listed at the end of the brief.

For vouchers, we recommend that private schools accepting public money should be held to accountability standards similar to the ones applied to district and charter schools. The trend in education has been for stronger standards to ensure effective spending of public dollars; it’s clear that Ohio’s voucher programs have been given a pass from meaningful oversight. This is unacceptable – schools that take public money must be held accountable for results, just as other publicly funded schools are. If they don’t meet standards, public funding should be withdrawn.

“Ohio has a reputation nationally as a state that puts too much faith in the free-market when it comes to charters and vouchers,” said van Lier. “This budget bill continues our state down this risky path. It’s not too late for policymakers to change course, but the trend is in the wrong direction.”

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